

# Improving Attitudes: Making Group Work More Effective

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## Group-based learning

Students' attitudes towards group work can have a powerful influence on their willingness to engage in it as well as the efficient functioning of groups.

Students' psychological attributes and their social skills are among the factors that can impact students' readiness for group work and thereby their attitudes toward group work.

This poster focuses on two such factors:  
**social anxiety and group work skills**

### Group based learning assumes students:

- Feel at ease with the idea of group work, and possess the psychological attributes to needed to function successfully in groups. (Cantwell and Andrews, 2002)
- However, socially anxious students are reticent to participate in group work and feel distress when in social situations. (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Zhou, 2016; Culotta and Goldstein, 2008)
- Posses the requisite social skills to able function effectively in a group. (Cumming et al., 2015)

However, group work is often undermined by students' lack of social skills and limited understanding of what it means to work cooperatively with others. (e.g., Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 1998; Prichard, Bizo, and Stratford 2006)

## Social Anxiety

A fear that occurs when people become concerned about how they are being perceived or evaluated by others. (Leary and Kowalski, 1995)

Anxiety affects attention to task, processing time for new language, as well as retrieval ability and willingness to use it. (Macintyre and Gardner, 1994)

High levels of social anxiety negatively influence students attitudes toward working in groups. (Cantwell and Andrews, 2002)

**Contingent** social situation: an individual's responses depend upon others' responses e.g., a conversation or chance encounter

**Noncontingent** social situation: depend upon one's plans and only minimally on others' responses. e.g., public speaking (Leary, 1983)

Group work is a highly contingent situation and so it presents more challenges to communication. (Cowden, 2010)

The greater ambiguity and uncertainty found in contingent situations are difficult for learners to deal with (Kondo and Yang, 1994) and therefore more anxiety provoking for socially anxious students. (Culotta and Goldstein, 2008)

## Group work skills

Skills that individual students use to help contribute to the effective functioning of the group they work in. (Cumming et al., 2015)

Social skills may not develop naturally as part of the group work process (Michaelson and Black, 1994) and this lack of skills can impair the function of groups, leading to negative attitudes towards group work. (Hillyard, Gillespie and Litig, 2010)

**Task management skills:** employed to help complete the group task e.g., setting goals, planning steps towards the goals, monitoring and evaluating progress and providing feedback

**Interpersonal skills:** focused on managing relationships between group members, e.g., conflict resolution, exchanging information and providing social support. (Cumming et al., 2105; Hobson et al., 2104; Morgan et al., 1986; Stevens and Campion, 1994)

Students who employed these types of skills were more positive towards working in groups and more positive about their abilities to work in a group. (Cumming, et al., 2015)

Training students in team-skills led to better performance in groups and higher achievement overall. (Prichard, Bizo and Stratford, 2006)

## Improving Attitudes

Learners experience more anxiety in novel or ambiguous situations (Daly, 1991), when working with unfamiliar people (Kondo, 2001) and in contingent social interactions.

- + Reduce ambiguity and novelty by assigning roles and repeating activities.
- + Take time to build rapport between group members. (Young, 1991; Xethakis, in print)
- + Structured activities can help decrease anxiety by reducing contingency (Fanztuzzo et al, 1989) as well as encouraging interaction and cooperation. (Xethakis, in print)

The effectiveness of group work is limited by learners who lack the skills to work successfully in group. (Prichard, Bizo, and Stratford 2006)

- + Provide team-skills training. Even 90 minutes of training can be effective! (Prichard, Stratford and Bizo, 2006)
- + Keep groups together: re-grouped students perform worse and the benefits of training are lost. (Prichard, Bizo and Stratford, 2010)
- + Teach group work skills as part of the curriculum and link them to course goals. (Prichard, Bizo and Stratford, 2006)
- + Encourage reflective self-assessment of skills for students involved in group work; this helps students understand their own behaviors in the group and suggests ways to alter them. (Dochy, Segers and Sluijsmans, 1999)

### Works Cited

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